Hotchkiss 1

Unit 2-4, Rolling Hills Cond
Lenox, MA 012
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Prof. Joshua Lederberg

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Dear Joshua:

I thought the DNA Round Table on that early February Thursday went pretty well, did you? It was all light and relaxed in spite of the ominous serious note from struck in the first advance notices. Perhaps it wasn't even "Historical" enough, in the end, though quite a few people told me that they learned a lot.

What it wasn't, was an occasion where we, the panelists, had much of a chance to talk professionally with each other--or maybe country life has caused me to forget how pressed, and busy, and preoccupied, the lives of my old friends has become. (We tend to find country life as busy--with realities--but then, I've been swept up in the "frontier" (!) culture of the city before--and on this visit again.) I suppose I must have been lax in getting into touch before people moved quickly on to their next public relations event.

What I began to get a grasp on, Joshua, was what might be the "block" that seems to get between us--you and me--whenever we get into the history of "chemical genetics". Is it possible that you feel slightly "offended" whenever in outlining the growing awareness that "bacteria do have genes!", I talk mainly about the transformation evidence--(i.e. units transferred <- via unit resistance mutants <- via "Demerec steps" <- via "Luria-Delbruck steps")---rather than K_{12} transfer steps? It would be easy to suppose me unmoved by the E. coli work perhaps, because I've not made it my business to review it or comment much. (I perceived it as a field of clever lone (at first) workers, like transformation--but unlike ours, active communicators, who didn't need me!)

Another factor was the gene traits themselves: biochemical traits were certainly not difficult for me to "grasp"--more likely, I was already aware of the easy concepts that bacteria "adapted" to ferment or "use" this or that, so in a sense, those traits were already "discounted"--merely to find one would not ipso facto, mean "here's a gene!". Being close to Ed Tatum, and that development, you clearly found these traits already strong indicators of genes. (Of course, the year--the chronology--would have to enter into any actual debating of that "issue"--IF it IS an issue!) By a similar argument, I was getting familiar with the fastidious heterotrophs for which the cell products, and drug resistances were turning out to be the convenient "markers".....Ah, well, need I go on? .....Maybe I found you "condescending" and amused, by the first DNA traits, and maybe you found me taking bacterial conjugation as complex (just as capable of being "holistic" as cell division--until the Wollman-Jacob experiments came along).....I doubt that I pondered deeply enough over conjugation as evidence, but I'm almost sure that I just thought we all were providing parallel evidences ....I am pretty sure that I didn't express condescension in any public way, but certainly I had my brash and impulsive moments (in prose and what's even verse!).....At least now I maybe understand how you (in a certain mood--and after you, Tom Brock) came to say that maybe the chemical nature of the gene wasn't necessarily of primary importance!

In any case, "apologies" for not getting to this in person - and before!

Regards

Roller